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Call Him Wildcat, Bobcat, or Bay Lynx, He's Still the . . .

Vanishing Spitfire

By Wilbert Nathan Savage

ASSEMBLE all the tales of terror that have been woven about the wildcat and you'll possess a romantic collection that will yield more fable than fact. For whether the episode setting is dated 30 years ago or three times that, greatly magnified accounts of evil behavior have traditionally attached themselves to the wild feline that may correctly be called *Lynx rufus*, Eastern bay lynx, bobcat or wildcat.

No matter what the vintage, Penn's Woods stories of wildcat conduct have of course always been competitive with the best of 'em! Reinforced with plenty of imagination and little restraint, they've tested the credulity of many a trusting listener. Even the Indian of long ago believed that the caterwauling of a prowling 'cat bore special messages worthy of painstaking interpretation! With so many fanciful 'cat stories filling from-here-to-there legend stockpiles, it is understandable that one of the best wildlife encyclopedias published today was moved to comment: "The bobcats have a reputation for ferocity that is more a matter of seeming than of reality. . . ."

But subtract, if you will, all the engaging yesteryear reports of exciting wildcat prowess and you'll still have an extraordinary bundle of furred dynamite that can deliver a whopping pound-for-pound account of himself in any situation where reasonable equity exists.

The side teeth of the wildcat act as shearers; the knifelike edges in each jaw slice up and down, cutting past each other, but do not meet. His four canine teeth (he'd spit at such a

Photo, right, by Leonard Lee Rue, III

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IMAGINATION and lack of restraint have led to countless stories about the wildcat which cannot be true—but which are highly interesting.

proper but insulting reference!) are precision battle fangs—a family characteristic, for cats in general (family *Felidae*), have the longest and sharpest canine teeth of all the carnivores.

Lynx rufus sports five hooked claws on each front foot, four on the rear. These are compressed on each side and there are no sharper claws in the world of mammals. Perfect cutting tools, they can instantly be extended or withdrawn into velvety pockets. The feet of the wildcat aren't as large as those of the Canadian lynx, but they are well padded for silent travel. While his legs are more slender than those of his northern kin, the lean hindquarters are fitted with the same type of rangy long legs that so capably act as catapulting springs when the need arises for projection in offensive or defensive action.

Like his hated foe, the dog, the wildcat is equipped with a moist nose and his sense of smell is as keen as his perfectly attuned hearing apparatus. His ears are furnished with hairs that catch every vibration in the air and accurately inform the animal of movements he has not even glimpsed. Another marvelous warning device: his whiskers connect with sensitive nerves and serve as instruments of touch so delicate and perceptive that they will register the slightest contact with the tip.

The wildcat's keen eyes are directed forward, like the human eye, allowing perfect focus and unerring judgment of distance. Pupils of the eye contract to shut out excess light by day, but at night they dilate to admit every minute trace of available light. The green glow from a wildcat's eyes struck at night by artificial light comes from a remarkable coating on the lining in back of the eye. This highly reflective substance is made up of masses of tiny particles called guanin. These have a silver-like luster which measurably boosts amplification of visibility wherever light conditions are poor.

Although the wildcat lacks the honed cunning of the red fox, he nonetheless is qualified to take his place as a darned sharp fellow in the wildfolk set. He is one animal that can hold an absolutely straight line of travel, no matter how dense the tangle of forest growth may be. Unpredictable, he may sometimes blunder into a partially exposed trap, while on other occasions he'll show admirably keen judgment in avoiding traps set and carefully concealed by expert trappers. Once caught—unlike many other furbearers—he will not gnaw or twist off his foot. He likes to preserve his anatomy—and his dignity.

A wise old 'cat can often thoroughly deceive an experienced pack of hound dogs. One 40-year veteran of wildcat hunting once commented: "You get good days and bad. Some days the hounds report one trail loss after another as they finally straggle in and beg me to call it a day. . . ."

Given a choice, the wildcat likes to den in the inaccessible recesses of

massive rock ledges. If the screening advantage of heavily timbered land is close by, so much the better. The male and female may den together for a while, but Papa flees the scene before the young are born and takes no part in the rearing of his offspring. Two to four are usually born in April or May at the end of a 50- to 60-day gestation term. The female is an excellent mother, allowing her kittens to nurse for up to two months. But the youngsters are sometimes thankless as they near adulthood. Nature writer Ralph H. Anderson once told of seeing a 15-pound wildcat turn on its mother, ". . . giving her a sound beating."

Where, in Penn's Woods, can the big wild feline be found? At one time the answer would have been, "In every county." No more. Like the panther that disappeared before him, the wildcat is being pressed by civilization into the most remote and inaccessible retreats that he can find. But even as he plays his best cards in the game of survival, he's steadily losing ground and may already be wearing the "vanishing" tag. Talk to mountain folk in many regions where the wildcat was plentiful less than four decades ago, and you'll learn that he's now regarded as locally extinct or so rare that only an occasional wandering individual passes through. Most of those remaining are found in the Northcentral counties. But even there you can only count on indexing the 'cat as "scarce."

Wildcat's Size

About the size of the wildcat—well, here's a good place for a little stimulating controversy. If we check a dozen reference books on the 'cat you can wager that we'll run into some conflicting figures. But old-time trappers who've caught dozens have the average weight pretty well pegged at 15 to 20 pounds. Exceptions? Of course. One of these was the 56-inch male 'cat taken by a Fulton County trapper on Town Hill Mountain in 1937. Its weight: 44 pounds—possibly a record for a Pennsylvania wildcat.

AT ONE TIME, wildcats could be found in every Pennsylvania county . . . but no more. Civilization has squeezed him into our most remote areas.

The scarcity of wildcats in this state led to their removal from the bounty list in 1937. During the eight-year period prior to that year, bounty was paid on 97 to 211 wildcats annually. Today, so few bobcats are left in the state that some people feel they should be put on the protected list, or declared a game animal with seasons to be set by the Game Commission.

Various factors have put the survival squeeze on the bobcat—things like finding enough palatable prey to satisfy his hunger. A favorite on his menu, the snowshoe rabbit, seems to be diminishing in numbers and this influence alone is enough to trigger a decline in the wildcat population.

While it is known that hares and rabbits are preferred foods of the wildcat, and may comprise up to 50 percent of his nourishment, he does prey on other creatures.

Numerous reports persist that the

Photo by Leonard Lee Rue, III

BY ANY STANDARD, wildcats are scarce in Pennsylvania. Many outdoorsmen and biologists fear they will become extinct in this state.

bobcat kills large numbers of deer. But if you should examine thousands of outdoor magazines that date back to 1899, as the author has, you'd find that most veteran outdoorsmen are of the opinion that a very high percentage of deer brought down by wildcats are cripples or perhaps a deer that can be taken full advantage of in deep, thinly crusted snow.

Remarkably, bobcats often eat porcupine flesh, which shows that the big tabby is willing to mix a few thorns with his roses! (Worthy of note is the fact that a wildcat can deftly handle a porcupine by inserting a lightning-fast forepaw beneath porky's belly and flipping him on his back so that the unprotected underside is exposed.)

Likes Mice

The wildcat also makes short work of mice—38 of 244 'cat stomachs examined contained rodents; 23 contained squirrel flesh; 15 yielded grouse; 25 others contained a blend of skunk, shrews, and muskrat. Never a pack hunter, the bobcat will eat any fresh kill from a blue-jay to a red fox; from mink to poultry; from fish and ducks to insects and chipmunks. He considers the red squirrel a special delicacy and will run himself ragged or wait with determined patience to catch one.

Wildcat coloration varies considerably, but albinos are extremely rare. A rusty buff is the usual color, overlain with darker spots and stripes. The underside is lighter, with less conspicuous markings. The ruff on either side of the head is not as full as that of the Canadian lynx, which also sports more noticeable ear tufts. The wildcat's tail is usually less than eight inches long, but the author recalls a medium-size 'cat trapped in 1944 by J. F. Browning along the Youghiogheny River south of Confluence, Pa., which had a very distinguished foot-long tail! The coloring of this 'cat was a bit off-key too, being smoky gray.

Amazing Anatomy

The amazing anatomy of the wildcat shows 13 pairs of ribs and usually 30 vertebrae in the back. His blood makes a complete circuit of the body in about 17 seconds and normal heartbeat ranges well over 100 beats per minute. If his temperature is 100° F or a wee bit higher, he's in fine fettle. He is equipped with 12 pairs of cranial nerves and 38 to 40 pairs of spinal nerves.

The bobcat made his appearance at the beginning of the Oligocene period some 40 million years ago, having developed from primitive carnivorous mammals known as *miacids.*

Just how much longer *Lynx rufus* will be around is up to man, for man alone holds the key to circumstances that may finally ring the wildcat's death knell—or wisely guarantee enduring survival in controlled numbers harmonizing with nature's own system of checks and balances.

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